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Abstract

Dropping free of the blue tinted cool onto hot sand, they trust to collective carapace, elbow through the call,
dart, tug of predatory gulls to sanctuary

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[1503 Portuguese, 1776 Dutch, 1795 British,
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Dropping free of the
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onto hot sand,
they trust to collective
carapace, elbow through
the call, dart, tug of
predatory gulls
to sanctuary.

These busloads shuffle in
and genuflect
to scuff off
footwear, scattered piles
an untidy reliquary.

Discalced, they mill and hum
processing aimlessly
cross pews and aisles;
three tour-guides speak in tongues
of history — English, Dutch —
give witness to salvation
of discovery and trade (not much
remains in Portuguese). The East
redeemed, da Gama's bones
were transubstantiated
home to Europe; photos
show the mystery
of the roped-off floor;
how was it mild
Franciscans left their birds
to tend the tombstone
of a murderer?

But fortunes turned.
The honest Dutch rebuilt the church
a tall fort, rock solid,
buttressed, same style
as the warehouses busily
mouldering downtown.
God's godown, then, for harvesting
of souls, each to be sorted
by regulations One to Ten
displayed in cold white lettering
beside the company Creed
and plaques to defunct shareholders.

In the fickle trade of time
stocks fluctuated like the
damoclean punkah bars
that fanned the faithful
(outside pagans winnowing their words
with each pull on a rope).
Translated gravestones
Declare flatly that
'here nothing lies':
the smooth impression
of your ancestors is all
you get. The cameras click.

I turn away
a surfeit,
and there — quite perfect
in its stillness, past
the crows' complaining
and a vendor's thin flute, just
a wall, pure white in morning
sun that cuts a sundial slant
crisp black of shutter. Such
a bright blankness frames
a bowl of white begonias
in a darkened room, brooding,
the calm contemplation all
instantly, utterly
itself.